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THE NIGHT LAUNDRESSES.

AN

Original Fairy Tale.

BY

MADAME DE CHATELAIN.

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THE

NIGHT LAUNDRESSES.

MANY, many years ago, when Little Brittany was governed by its own dukes, a lonely traveller was proceeding thither on horseback, after the slow fashion of those days, when post horses were not dreamt of, and inns were so scarce, that wayfarers had to

trust to chance hospitality for a night's lodging and a supper. It is true that the virtue of hospitality was rife in the times alluded to, and that the inhabitants of lordly castles, leading a somewhat lonely life, were pleased rather than otherwise to welcome strangers, especially knights of high degree, or minstrels, who could amuse them with the latest song. But our traveller, apparently belonging to neither of these classes, being mounted on a sturdy nag, instead of a prancing charger, and clad in sober coloured garments, could only lay claim to being received as

a humble guest, to sit below the salt.

Guichard, for such was the traveller's name, had come all the way from Paris, and was now crossing Anjou, and just calculating how many days it would take him to reach Rennes, and feeling rather tired withal, when his sight was gladdened by a noble looking castle, on whose terrace, overlooking a lovely garden, sat a gay party of richly drest cavaliers and ladies. In the centre of the group appeared a lady, whose extraordinary beauty so dazzled Guichard, that after involun-

tarily gazing a moment, he was about to ride on, ashamed of presenting himself in his humble garb, to claim the rest and refreshment he stood in need of, whereupon the lady despatched her page to him with a gracious invitation to enter, which Guichard felt unable to resist. After welcoming him with graceful ease, the young Countess Amalafrède questioned him about his journey, but Guichard was too much overcome by the sight of her beauty to be able to answer two words connectedly. Seeing this, and feeling flattered by his involuntary homage to

her charms, the Countess relieved him from his confusion by bidding a young damsel in her service, named Huguette, shew the stranger to the castle, and see that he was attended to.

Huguette, nothing loth to obey, tripped along, chatting and laughing as she went, but without eliciting a single compliment on her own pretty face, so absorbed was Guichard by the Countess's image. Growing rather piqued at his want of taste, as she deemed it, Huguette indulged in a little raillery at his expense.

"If you were but a knight, Sir Stranger!" said she, "your

helmet would have been unlaced by my mistress's fair fingers! Or had you been only a minstrel she would have presented you with a cup of wine in exchange for a song. But—ah me!—as you are neither, you must rest content with my poor services!"

But seeing him only bow and smile in an absent manner, she soon perceived she was wasting her wit upon him, and presently changed her tactics, and began talking of her mistress's peerless beauty, and observed what a pity it was that so unreasonable a condition should be enjoined on any one

who aspired to the Countess's hand—she who had admirers by the dozen, nay, by scores! "What is the condition?" cried Guichard eagerly, his eyes flashing fire as he spoke.

Huguette laughed. "Nay, what is that to you, sir stranger, who are not a knight? But come," added she, seeing Guichard hang his head in silence, "since you are so curious I will tell you, only you must eat meanwhile, and not look so downhearted."

She then proceeded to relate that the Countess's late father, having consulted many astrologers and wise men, as to the

choice of a suitor, against his daughter should be of an age to marry, was informed by an old bard who could read in futurity, that the young Countess would never be happy in the married state, unless her lover went and conquered a dragon on the banks of the Dordu in Brittany, and carried off a sapphire amulet the monster had guarded for centuries, as a proof of his victory. "And sapphires, you know," added Huguette, "are emblems of truth and constancy." "I did not know that," said the young man, "but go on, I entreat you." "That's all," replied

Huguette, yawning, "and if you don't believe me, look at this vellum scroll, on which the prophecy stands recorded in pretty red, blue, and gold letters, and—supposing you can read, which I can't—you will see that the late Count enjoins his loving daughter to be guided by its sage advice."

The stranger glanced eagerly at its contents, and perceived it said nothing about the suitors being knights or nobles. Then he asked how it came that hundreds had not striven for the prize? Huguette replied that many had; but some came back declaring they could not

find the dragon, and many more had not returned at all; but that two new candidates were starting that very day. He now rose, and thanking Huguette for the hospitality received, said he would depart without disturbing the lady; but the damsel, having received her orders, insisted on bringing him back to the Countess's presence.

Meantime the tongues of the highborn party had not been idle, and many were the surmises as to the rank and calling of the stranger. Some of the ladies thought he might be of gentle birth, while Ama-

lafrède observed that gentle or simple he was very handsome, but that she would soon learn the truth on this point. No sooner, therefore, did he come back, then she turned towards him and talked in glowing terms of the tournaments she had witnessed, and next of the minstrels who sing the deeds of great warriors, but failed to elicit a word that could betray whether the stranger belonged to either order. At last she threw an impatient glance at her two suitors, as much as to bid them come to her aid, when Hubert, who was extremely proud of his high

descent, and had been chafing all this time with jealousy at her taking so much notice of an obscure stranger, said in an ironical tone: "Perhaps, Sir Stranger, you have come hither on the same errand as ourselves, and charitably conceal your prowesses lest we should be discouraged?" Guichard coloured and was about to reply, when Palmerin, who was just as arrogant but of a gayer turn than his rival, exclaimed: "Though we cannot allow you to kill the dragon until he has devoured us both, the survivor will not refuse to measure

swords with you to add to his glory."

"Good Sirs," cried the countess, laughing and chiding all in a breath, "I cannot allow an unarmed guest to be challenged in such a manner. After all, he has as good a right as yourselves to kill dragons if he pleases." "And please Heaven I will slay him!" cried Guichard with sudden fire.

The knights now frowned, and were sorry they had taunted him, especially seeing the Countess smile rather encouragingly upon the handsome stranger. "And pray,

Sir Dareall," resumed Palmerin, "where is your trusty sword?" "I have no weapon but this," said Guichard, taking from his bosom a small dagger with a handle of exquisite workmanship, inlaid with precious stones: "but if her ladyship bid me go and conquer the dragon, I should be encased in such impenetrable armour, that I need not fear leaving my dagger behind." So saying he laid it at Amalafrède's feet. "Ah," sighed the Countess, pointing to the dagger for her page to pick up. "I doubt if you, Sirs, with all your boasted courage and pro-

fessions of love would do as much." Palmerin pulled his rival by the sleeve, whispering: "I now think she wishes us to get killed." Hubert nodded assent, yet hastened to fling down his sword protesting he disdained any advantage over this unknown rival, and would not claim back his sword till he came to claim the Countess's hand. Palmerin lost no time in following his example, and the lady calling to her father's old squire, bid him put away the two weapons in the armoury, but the dagger she kept in her hand, saying it was a pretty toy,

and that she was fond of gems.

Now the two knights, though very brave, did not much relish being obliged to imitate what they considered a piece of foolhardiness, still it gave them so great a respect for Guichard's courage, that they agreed to journey with him, and they all three set out together, and never rested till they had reached Rennes. Here Guichard said he had to discharge a duty before risking to be devoured by the dragon, and accordingly left his companions at a hostelry, promising to join them in an hour or

so. But the two knights thinking it was only a trick to get the start of them, determined to follow him at a distance, which they did until they saw him enter the ducal palace. They now exchanged looks of surprise, and Palmerin proposed they should follow him in and ask to be allowed to pay their respects to the Duchess. But they were informed that her highness was giving audience to a stranger just arrived from Paris, and that they could not be admitted. The knights retired, but loitered in the neighbourhood till they espied Guichard

coming out of the palace, looking more light-hearted than he had yet appeared. "He is perhaps after all a prince in disguise," muttered they, following him back to the inn, rather ashamed of their mean suspicions, and little dreaming of the truth—but of this more anon.

Again they all journeyed on together till they reached the river Dordu, near which stood a small hermitage beneath the shelter of some high rocks, where lived a bard of venerable appearance, with a long white beard reaching to his waist. The three horsemen alighted,

and requested a night's shelter, which was readily granted. During the evening meal Hubert informed the hermit of the errand on which they were bound, and then claimed having the start of his companions, seeing that he had enregistered his name amongst the Countess's suitors before Palmerin. To this the latter agreed, saying in turn that he claimed the precedence over Guichard for the like reason. The delay fixed was a day and a night, and their venerable host offered the shelter of his hermitage to those who remained behind.

Next day, when Hubert's

foot was in the stirrup, he asked the bard which was the road to the dragon, but the old man shook his head, saying: "Those who seek will find." Hubert then bid them all farewell till evening. "Alas! my son," exclaimed the hermit, "who knows whether you three will ever meet again upon earth!" "Peace! I want none of your croakings!" said the haughty knight as he waved his hand and disappeared.

But the day passed and the night darkened, and Hubert was not seen again. "It is now my turn," said Palmerin, gaily next morning, as he leapt

into his saddle, "I shall bring you word whether Hubert has been devoured by the dragon." "Jest not, my son," said the bard, forebodingly, "for who knows if you yourself are destined ever to return?" But Palmerin only laughed lightly, saying: "Faint heart never won fair lady!" and away he rode, along the banks of the Dordu, till he met a fisherman running towards him with frantic gestures, and imploring his aid. On hauling out the nets he had spread over night, the man had drawn up the dead body of a richly drest nobleman, and dreaded being ac-

cused of murder. A sudden thought flashed across Palmerin's brain, and bidding the fisherman conduct him to the fatal spot, he found Hubert lying stiff and cold as he expected.

After muttering :—" Poor Hubert!" in a tone of indifference, he bid the fisherman convey the body to the nearest church or monastery, adding that he would come back to attend the burial. He then rode onwards, but not being able to learn any tidings of the dragon, all he could do was to follow the traces of Hubert's steed, until it grew dark. Just

as the moon was beginning to rise, he reached a spot where the river grew wider and wider, till it lay like a silver sheet in the sparkling moonbeams, when his horse began to neigh aloud, and next stood stock still, refusing to stir a step further. Feeling satisfied the animal's instinct led him to dread the dragon's vicinity, Palmerin dismounted, and left the horse to graze, while he proceeded on foot to reconnoitre. But he only descried a number of women all in white, busy washing garments in the river. It struck him as odd how they had come

there so suddenly yet so noiselessly.

"Ho there! you laundresses!" shouted he, "are you not afraid the dragon should come and sup on one of you?" Instead of answering they beckoned him to approach. Though strangely thrilled by their unearthly appearance, Palmerin would have deemed it disgraceful to hesitate, and he walked boldly up to the group, when one of the laundresses presented him a dripping garment, making signs to him to wring it. "I, forsooth! stoop to such a menial office?" cried he fiercely, pushing away

the garment in high disdain, when suddenly the troop of laundresses closed round him, and plunged him into the river, whose waters gurgled and then closed over him for ever!

On the third morning Guichard prepared to go forth in turn. "Give me your blessing, father," said he to the old man. The aged hermit laid his trembling hand on his head, saying: "Be of good cheer my son, the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong." And he stood at his door watching him wistfully, as the young man rode away

unarmed, but with a trusting heart.

Guichard followed the same road the others had taken, till seeing some deep foot-prints, leading in another direction, he came to a chapel belonging to a monastery, where the bodies of Hubert and Palmerin were lying side by side. Though they had been rivals in life, he now forgot their arrogance and their taunts, and kneeling down, sprinkled holy water on their pall, after which he resumed his journey along the river till night, when he in turn reached the haunt of the laundresses, who beckoned to

him from afar. He now dismounted, finding his nag shivered all over and refused to stir, and went forward undaunted—for what had he to fear, he who had never wronged anybody? To him the white women appeared a gathering of pretty laundresses, and when they silently offered the wet garments for him to wring, he smilingly assented, thinking they needed the assistance of a stronger arm than theirs, and wrung first one garment and then another, and so on to the last, when — oh wonder of wonders! — the water thus wrung out, turned to pearls

and sapphires as it fell on the ground, and the laundresses wishing him joy of his good luck, disappeared from his sight. Guichard looked round on the shining heaps with unutterable joy, and took up handfuls of the sparkling treasures to assure himself they were real—and who better than himself could tell they were the finest sapphires that ever sparkled in an empress's diadem? For truth to say, our young adventurer was neither knight nor noble, but a foundling to whom the Duchess of Brittany had stood godmother, and apprenticed to

a cunning goldsmith in Paris, where he learnt his craft to perfection. This circumstance, together with his high character for honesty and bravery, explains why he had been entrusted with the care of conveying to Rennes some ornaments her highness had ordered.

Well! here were the sapphires, but where was the dragon? Guichard thought it wisest first of all to hide his treasure under some brushwood, after filling his pockets with as much as he could carry away at one time, and then ride back to the hermi-

tage, where it was soon agreed that the whole treasure should be lodged, till Guichard could remove it under a safe escort. This having been accomplished with the hermit's aid, Guichard prepared to start with renewed hope to vanquish the dragon, when the old man said: "Rest in peace my son, your task is fulfilled. I was the bard who prophecied years ago, that Amalafrède could only expect happiness in wedding him who conquered the dragon, but the dragon meant PRIDE. Had Hubert or Palmerin possessed sufficient humility to wring the linen of

the fairy laundresses, they would now both be living. But all is for the best !"

Who was now so happy as Guichard? After taking an affectionate leave of the hermit he hurried on to Rennes, and soon returned with coffers and an armed escort to remove his riches. He would fain have taken away the venerable bard himself, but the old man wished to die where he had lived so long. On reaching Rennes, Guichard fitted himself out as became the now wealthiest man in the kingdom, and had another interview with his godmother, to

whom he presented some pearls and sapphires, and she in return gave him a small present in a gold box, which she smilingly told him must only be opened in his lady's presence. He then journeyed on to Anjou, and on approaching the Countess's castle left his escort behind, retaining only a page, whom he sent in with a sapphire bracelet he had himself set at a goldsmith's workshop in Rennes, with the message that the only survivor of her three suitors requested an interview. The Countess turned pale, and came in greater haste than etiquette

would have warranted to see which of the three it might be. She however checked the real joy she felt on seeing Guichard, and strove to say very coldly: "Sir Stranger, I believe I have a dagger to return you?"

"Place it in my heart, lady," said he, "since I see by your coldness you were only trifling with me when you took my pledge."

A pearly tear now trembled on the young Countess's eyelashes, and then she smiled, and strove to say in a gay tone: "Nay, Sir Knight, I must then not accept the bracelet,

and I have a great fancy for sapphires!"

"I am not a knight, sweet lady," said he modestly, "only a goldsmith, whom love made brave." He then related his whole story, and when he had finished, Amalafrède was so touched by his lofty sentiments, that she kissed the bracelet, saying: "Knight or goldsmith, I care not—I too will conquer the dragon Pride."

So saying she put her hand in his, and then he drew forth the golden box the Duchess had given him, and on opening it he found it contained letters

of nobility, empowering him to style himself the Sire de Renneval. Besides this, he whispered in the countess's ear that she would be the wealthiest lady in the whole length and breadth of France. This was pleasant news, and yet I hardly think it made Amalafrède any happier than she felt on seeing Guichard return unharmed.—Do you ?

THE END.